

Irrigation in the American West: Area, Water and Economic Activity

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"Irrigation in the
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Irrigation is the
defining characteristic of
crop production in the
American West. Irrigated
agriculture uses the most
freshwater (90 percent) of
any economic sector in the

West. Surface-water sources such as streams, rivers, and lakes provide 68 percent of withdrawals while the remaining 32 percent are obtained from groundwater sources. According to the 1997 Census of Agriculture, 43 million acres of agricultural land were irrigated in the West, and these lands produced 72 percent of crop sales on only 27 percent of the total harvested crop acreage. High-valued orchards, berries, vegetables, and nursery crops account for almost 60 percent of the West's total value of sales from irrigated crops on just 15 percent of the land irrigated. Field and forage crops account for the remaining 40 percent of sales, but occupy 71 percent of the irrigated area. The wide difference in crop values and the concentrated production of high-valued crops provides flexibility for farmers with irrigation to adjust to changes in water availability through adjusting their cropping choices and participating in innovative water markets.

